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The Power of Parent Engagement: Sociocultural Considerations in the Quest for Equity

This article explores the difference between parental involvement, where parents' activity levels at school are primarily structured by schools, and parental engagement, where parents have a more active voice in how they take part in what goes on in schools. This difference is underscored as a means of illuminating ways of addressing the issue of racialized disproportionality in special education and acts of school discipline, particularly in urban settings. We highlight the ways schools need to transform the often microaggressively oppressive ways

parents are invited into their children's education process, as well as the way schools value the knowledge parents bring. Effective ways of activating parental engagement as a means of creating authentic community engagement are also examined. Additionally, recommendations are provided on how to prepare novice teachers to develop plans and goals alongside parents in order to help these new educators develop a pedagogical stance that authentically values the importance of one of schools' most important stakeholders—parents.

In the quest for educational equity and excellence for the country's youth, it is no mystery that parents play a crucial role in this pursuit. They are so integral that legislation

like IDEA (2004) and the recently revised Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015 make parent and community partnerships central to the academic success equation. The latter goes so far as to strike the language of “parental involvement” with a change to “parent and family engagement.” The recently modified legislation includes provisions for programs and practices that specifically address parent engagement in a meaningful way, especially those that reach parents and family members who fall under the category of disadvantaged. Moreover,

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the statute allocates for resources, programming, and funding directed toward collaboration with community organizations that have a proven track record of increasing family engagement.

Although one cannot be certain what prompted the change in terminology, what is evident is a crucial shift through the ESSA (2015) expansions to NCLB (2004)—parents and families are legally mandated to sit at the table with more input and decision-making power than before. These statutory modifications could potentially signal the beginning of practices that include parents and family members in a way that holistically benefits children. The legislation includes provisions for developing policies that address the barriers, needs, and relevant strategies for all parents and families, especially those belonging to racial, ethnic, and linguistically diverse and economically disadvantaged populations. However, it is also important to be responsive to the roles that race, culture, and class play when parents engage with schools (Howard & Reynolds, 2008).

Although great and warranted attention is often paid to transforming what goes on in the classroom with students when it comes to race, culture, language, class, etc. (Delpit, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1995), an equal amount of energy should also be dedicated to parents in these regards. Additionally, although educators bring professional knowledge to the table, parents bring an expertise that should be valued and incorporated in any map toward the educational equity and excellence that is being sought (Reynolds, 2010; Street, 2005). This is particularly the case when one looks at issues of disproportionality in special education and acts of discipline. Racism, cultural incongruence, and bias have all been cited in education discourse as roots of the disproportionality problem (Ferri & Connor, 2005; Harry & Klingner, 2014; Skiba, Simmons, Ritter, Kohler, Henderson, & Wu, 2006). Consequently, it is imperative that educators include parents as they fight these barriers to growth in the education system.

This article suggests that to address the issues of racialized disproportionality and truly enact the spirit of the laws (i.e., ESSA and IDEA)

that mandate parent engagement as a key to educational success, educators must transform how they invite parents to the table while ensuring meaningful collaboration. This requires not only a shift in how their expertise is valued, but also a reckoning with the historically embedded socio-cultural hurdles that parents often face. As Reynolds and Howard (2013), stated, “A continued critique of parent involvement practices without acknowledging the social conditions parents experience leaves our conversation about the power of the parent in furthering school reform disjointed, if not deceptive” (p. 206).

Through examination of these issues, recommendations for more responsive parent engagement are offered. Additionally, a particular emphasis is placed on how to prepare novice teachers to truly partner with parents and develop a pedagogical stance that authentically values the power of parental engagement.

Involvement Versus Engagement

Central to this article is the distinction between parental involvement and engagement. Reynolds (2010) made the distinction in her work in the following manner, “The term ‘Involvement’ used in this work refers to school-sanctioned, school authored activities in which parents participate. The term ‘Engagement’ is conceptualized as encompassing those activities parents structure for themselves and their self-directed relational interactions with school officials” (p. 144). Adapting this thinking around the language we use for parental collaborations helps place parents in an empowering position.

The key to this thinking is to allow room for parents who naturally take the initiative to structure their own interactions with schools, while also providing support for parents who have a more deferential attitude toward educators (Lareau & Horvat, 1999; More, Hart, & Cheatham, 2013). Research has shown that teachers may have a preference for deferential parents who passively accept whatever information they receive at schools (More et al., 2013). It has also been demonstrated that teachers may develop biases about parents that may prohibit true partnership (Harry, 1997; Harry & Klingner,

2014; Kalyanpur & Harry, 2012). In this manner, Reynolds and Howard (2013) highlighted perceptions educators must be wary of, "It seems that parents are positioned as either scapegoats, bearing the blame for poor educational outcomes for the neediest students, or opponents who should be feared, not necessarily respected or welcomed as full partners" (p. 204).

With a move toward truly engaging parents while being wary of implicit biases that educators might hold, sociocultural considerations must be taken into account. As education discourse has posited, social reproduction theories place students (and their families) with cultural and social capital in a better position to see educational success than those who lack these forms of *currency* (Laureau & Horvat, 1999). Therefore, although educators have the support of the law to usher them toward this place of true engagement, if deeper work around the issues parents face does not take place, teachers run the risk of falling short of truly fulfilling the spirit of the law.

Disproportionality and Parent Voice

The disproportionate presence of minoritized students in special education and acts of discipline are well-documented social justice issues in education discourse (Ferri & Connor, 2005; Harry & Klingner, 2014; Krezmien, Leone, & Achilles, 2006; Skiba, Arredondo, & Williams, 2014; Waitoller, Artiles, & Cheney, 2010). The most recent annual report from the US Department of Education on the implementation of IDEA, showed that in 2013, African American students had a higher risk of identification for the majority of disability categories, as compared to all other ethnic groups. American Indian or Alaska Native, African American, and Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander children were more likely to be served under IDEA than were children in all other racial/ethnic groups combined (US Department of Education [USDOE], 2015).

In the realm of school discipline, the Department reported that Black students are suspended at a rate more than three times that of

their White counterparts (USDOE, 2014). The report also showed that students with disabilities are twice as likely to be suspended as are students without disabilities. Black girls are also suspended at higher rates than girls of any other racial or ethnic group. Additionally, Black students represent 16% of total student enrollment; however, they represent 27% of students referred to law enforcement and 31% of students subjected to a school-related arrest. This is in comparison to their White counterparts, who comprise 51% of enrollment, 41% of law enforcement referrals, and 39% of those arrested. Research has shown that disproportionality is a racialized issue and often stems from cultural incongruence between school staff members and the communities they serve (Harry & Klingner, 2014). Much attention has been placed on how to correct these ills at the classroom level. Research has examined the ways that biased views of minoritized children have been conduits for these students experiencing special education referral and discipline in a more severe manner than their White counterparts (Skiba et al., 2006). In districts with disproportionality, school personnel must create genuinely open avenues for engaging parents' interpretations of their children's difficulties. This should include encouraging parents to observe the classroom from which the child is being referred and including the parents' opinions in the evaluation process. For example, Harry and Klingner (2014) reported that a second-grader, whose mother was incarcerated, had been evaluated as "emotionally disturbed," but in the placement meeting her grandmother was ignored as she exclaimed, "There's nothing wrong with her; she just wants her Momma!" The researchers believed that genuine communication with this family could have resulted in a very different outcome for this child.

Transforming Our Purpose with Parents

To tackle these issues, as one looks to laws like IDEA (2004) and ESSA (2015) to guide the way teachers educate schools' most vulnerable youth, they must transform the climate of schools

in ways that will invite and sustain authentic parent engagement. Well documented in the literature is a relationship characterized as distant between schools and African American parents, with significant distrust on the part of the parents and implicit and explicit cultural assumptions on the part of school personnel. As Reynolds (2010) found in her study,

When interfacing with school officials, parents often felt that their exchanges were wrought with misunderstanding and unspoken hostility. More damaging and most effective in serving as an impediment to a healthy relationship were the implied negative messages Black parents received from school officials regarding their sons. (p. 152)

These types of interactions can often stem from cultural conflict (Delpit, 1995). One could surmise that racial microaggressions (Davis, 1989; Reynolds, 2010; Kohli & Solórzano, 2012) are often at the heart of these interactions. Davis (1989) defined microaggressions as “stunning, automatic acts of disregard that stem from unconscious attitudes of White superiority and constitute a verification of Black inferiority” (p. 1576). As Delpit (1995) suggested, racial discrimination can happen covertly, overtly, and subtly; and perhaps it is the latter that is the most dangerous, as is the case with microaggressions, since they often happen unconsciously and without malicious intent. In addition, the hidden nature of these subtler forms of racism make them much more difficult to identify, address and overcome (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012).

Parents may experience these microaggressions as a flippant tone of voice, dismissive facial expressions, or perception of the parent’s disagreement with teachers as denial or unfit parenting (Delpit, 1995; Harry & Klingner, 2014; Kalyanpur & Harry, 2012). Educators may also exhibit these behaviors by imposing goals for students that suit their own cultural norms, rather than eliciting goals with parents that value students’ cultures as well. Having to contend with these types of interactions can create social distance that prohibits schools

from valuing the cultural capital that parents bring (Noguera, 2001).

Reynolds (2010) found that parents were not only on guard against these microaggressions, but they also explicitly taught their children about the reality of dealing with these occurrences. Parents’ ways of rearing their children around these issues constitute a knowledge base that educators should be aware of to build bridges with parents and students. These bridges can help create reciprocal relationships through which educators develop their own self-awareness (Kalyanpur & Harry, 2012) as they go about the trying work of educating students and supporting families through the pangs of systemic inequities.

Transforming our Purpose with Communities

Educational scholar Joyce Epstein (1995) wrote, “If educators view students as children, they are likely to see both the family and the community as partners with the school in children’s education and development” (p. 1). This researcher introduced a significant framework with which to analyze the effectiveness of schools. The theory of “overlapping spheres” is based on the assumption that the traditional models that maintain separate and sequential relationships among schools and families, maintain inequitable relationships that are often sources of conflict (Epstein, 1987). Epstein’s model illustrated the collaboration between schools and families, though mediated by the internal and external forces by which they operate, which include historical changes, funding, and patterns of overlap within school and community contexts (Epstein, 1987). Although this model would suggest a best practice across school contexts, research has shown that this overlap has been uncommon among urban schools, despite the evidence supporting the benefits of such relationships (Epstein, 1987; Goldring, 1986; Khalifa, 2012; Lareau & Horvat, 1999). Goldring (1986), for example, emphasized the significance of learning and cooperating with the family community as variable for increasing parental engagement, as

encountering unfamiliar and heterogeneous communities may contribute to the negative perceptions principals exhibit toward parents (Goldring, 1986). Therefore, defining and tracing the histories of school contexts under the key terms of *urban schools* and *effective schools* may help further illuminate why communities may be a crucial conduit for enhancing parental engagement.

Defining Urban Schools

Comer, Huxby, and Rawlins (1999) described the concept of an urban school as something beyond a geographical location but relating to the “demography and conditions—generally predominantly African American and Hispanic schools” (p. 327). The authors added that the creation of successful urban schools is, in part, due to acknowledging the multiple forces at work but also to address two significant issues:

The first is the remarkable speed of economic change that has taken place, and the inability to adjust institutions responsible for community and child development fast enough. The second and related problem is the belief that learning is primarily a function of intelligence rather than development. This static and mechanical model leads to low expectations of children who could learn at a higher level if only an adequate focus were placed on their development. (p. 322)

Urban schools and their surrounding communities typically reflect a historically distant and disconnected relationship, partially due to distrust; limited understanding of the structure and power of communities; and the traditional power dynamics between school leadership, parents, and community leaders (Khalifa, 2012). Ethnographer Charles Payne (as cited in Cromer et al, 1999) described the impediments toward transforming urban schools as falling into five categories: (a) social infrastructure, (b) building-level politics, (c) instructional capacity, (d)

environmental turbulence, and (e) structure of support for implementation (Comer et al., 1999). Within the first and second domains, Payne illuminated the relationship of distrust and social barriers among parents, teachers, and administrators: racial and ethnic tensions, as well as adherence to patterns and established patterns of power and collaboration.

Defining Effective Schools

What constitutes an effective school has been defined and redefined throughout history and is subject to legislative, social, and political trends. Research studies have also mirrored these trajectories and the shifts in focus have its effects on practice. The line of research on effective schools began in the late 1960s, in response to the findings within the Coleman Report, *Equality of Educational Opportunity*, commissioned by Section 402 of the 1964 Civil Rights Act (Coleman et al., 1966). Although it indicated the low achievement among minority populations in the United States, the report attributed this to familial, rather than school, factors. A launch of research studies ensued, whose primary purpose was to examine the *negative case examples* where minority students were thriving in schools. These exemplary schools were found and analyzed for their descriptive characteristics by scholars such as Brookover and Lenzotte (1977) and Edmonds and Fredericksen (1979), which contradicted the earlier findings of the Coleman Report. Researchers found that such schools:

had strong instructional leadership, conveyed a strong sense of mission, demonstrated effective instructional behaviors, held high expectations for all students, practiced frequent monitoring of student achievement, and operated in a safe and orderly manner. These shared attributes eventually became known as the correlates of effective schools. (Lezotte & Snyder, 2011, p. 24)

However, critics of Edmonds and Fredericksen noted that the ineffective schools, identified by the researchers, as both “general, having effects

regardless of race and class and as discriminatory, having effects because of race and class” (Sizemore, 1985, p. 275) with the effective schools’ descriptor tending to fall under the general category. The researcher added that these schools were not described as effective specifically for what they could do for “poor black students” (Sizemore, 1985, p. 275) but were identified for these characteristics without looking at race and class issues.

Simultaneously, the work of African American scholars in the fields of education, psychology, anthropology, and linguistics challenged the long-standing assumptions of race-based deficits that were prevalent across so many domains. Asa Hilliard III was a major contributor to rethinking that the European-based norms, by which almost all societal institutions had established standards, was the only way in which to conceptualize knowledge, behaviors, beliefs and practices (Lee, 2008). Rather, Hilliard’s intensive research on African traditions of socialization, power dynamics, and language acquisition, as well as other cultural practices, shed light on the potential of embracing new ways of learning and designing learning spaces. Emerging at the same time was ecological theory, which looked at the interactive exchanges between multilayered systems and the individual. A new conceptualization, the African-centered ecological grounding applied these socialization principles rooted within a rich cultural context and applied them to multiple systems (Lee, 2008). Hilliard presented a challenge to the traditional educational model by infusing strong African philosophies, to present a holistic and developmental approach to learning, with emphasis on the moral dimension. He also challenged the deficit paradigm, adding that all children have an intrinsic ability to learn and potential to develop their learning capacities. Another primary learning principle developed by Hilliard, broadened the context and purpose of education by stating the goal of socialization in schools was not solely for individual development, but to help prepare youth for incorporation into a community, and further, to be interconnected with family and community (Lee, 2008).

A second trend of research and interventions addressed this issue by seeking to empower families. A research study conducted by Bronfenbrenner, Cross, and Cochran et al. (1981) among 276 families, designed to study the capacity of school environments to service children, examined the ways in which home-school partnerships may serve as a factor in the empowerment process. The researchers emphasized that communications of all types were substantially initiated and related to teachers’ assessment of children experiencing academic difficulties in school (Cochran, 1985).

In the 1980s to 1990s, despite the dearth of literature supporting the failures of urban schools to support minority education, there was a gap in the research supporting a method for creating effective schools (Lezotte & Snyder, 2011; Sizemore, 1985). Other researchers challenged the publicized measures of effectiveness, emphasizing that these variables may not be applicable across school contexts (Hallinger & Murphy, 1986). A focus on institutional leadership positioned the principal as the primary change agent for the improvement of student outcomes, particularly in their recruitment of teachers (Rosenholtz, 1985; White-Smith, 2012). A focus on school-level characteristics emphasized the ecology of the school and organizational challenges as a source of attention. Researchers also noted that although there was a substantial focus on leadership, there was very little in the literature to describe the characteristics, attributes, and activities among strong leaders in the effective schools (Sizemore, 1985). Transformational leadership, which began in the 1990s, focused on shared instructional leadership at the school-community level, which includes school personnel (White-Smith, 2012).

Traditional models of school-parent collaborations have also typically equated parental involvement with parents coming into the school, as a means to establish and maintain successful partnerships. Researchers have found this to be a limitation, both logistically and historically, as these models “are often at odds with school-community understandings within African American communities, given their historical and

culturally specific models of school leadership” (Khalifa, 2012, p. 461). This was also found to exist as a barrier for Latino families (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Lopez, Scribner, & Mahitivanichcha, 2001).

Research has demonstrated the effectiveness of the partnership model between schools and communities. However, the power dynamics within this relationship seem to be a continued barrier, particularly for urban schools. As Khalifa (2012) described, “The prevalent practice has been for schools to control the dialogue, to have school-oriented goals at the center of the relationship, and to place community-related goals and interests at the periphery” (p. 458).

In the *Harvard Educational Review*, Emilie Siddle Walker (1993) provided a contrasting analysis of African American school and community relationships. The researcher used ethnographic methods to underscore the historically collaborative and mutually supportive relationship between schools and communities. Although parents did not attend the traditional PTA meetings, an ongoing measure of parental involvement, schools depended on the parents for economic resources, advocacy, and to make “economic sacrifices” to support educational outcomes while the parents depended on the schools for the academic steering (Siddle Walker, 1993, p. 175). The researcher emphasized the reciprocity between the school and communities, as teachers and principals were present in community-based activities, which increased the rapport among parents, school personnel, community members, and administration (Siddle Walker, 1993).

Recent research has returned to the role of the school principal as a leader and effector of change for successful urban schools, focusing on his or her role in the community as a coleader and a bridge to the school context. In a 2012 ethnographic study comparing school-centered and community-centered approaches toward leadership within successful urban schools, Khalifa found that the principal’s presence and fostered relationship with the community seemed to mitigate some of the parent-school distance and

social barriers commonly found within urban schools. He added: “For some communities, school leaders must earn credibility, trust, and establish rapport; for urban, African American, and other marginalized areas, these are earned in the community and not granted from within the school walls” (Khalifa, 2012, p. 459).

Response to Intervention (RtI and Positive Behavioral Interventional Supports (PBIS)

RtI and PBIS have provided avenues through which IDEA (2004) has attempted to ensure that students who are struggling academically and behaviorally are proactively supported (Bal, Kozleski, Schrader, Rodriguez, & Pelton, 2014). In theory, these multitiered intervention systems are meant to collaboratively respond to student issues, and serve as a preventive measure for ensuring that special education labels and disciplinary methods are enacted with fidelity. However, these methods are often implemented as generic, lock-step processes, determined mainly by school personnel (Cavendish, Harry, Menda, Espinosa, & Mahotiere, 2016). To the contrary, they should not only include parents at every step of the process, but they should also be culturally responsive so as to include the funds of knowledge and cultural capital that parents bring (Noguera, 2001; Reynolds, 2010; Street, 2005). This level of parent input can be the difference between teachers knowing how to effectively provide tiered support at nuanced levels specific to students’ needs and cultural backgrounds, and teachers concluding that their interventions are ineffective because the student has a disability or behavioral issue.

For example, Reynolds (2010) provided the following account of her experience after she was called to the school because her son was defiant. Upon her observation of her son’s kindergarten class, she witnessed the White female teacher ask her child if he wanted to join the other students for circle time, and her son refused the invitation:

After her smirk, I modeled for the teacher the intonation and phrasing which would elicit the response she wanted. In a kind but firm voice,

I said, “Marcus, put your things away and go over to circle time.” Marcus looked a little panicked when he first saw me. But when he saw my smile, he quickly responded to my directive, stopped his task, and walked over to circle time with his peers in the orderly fashion the teacher coveted. The teacher was amazed. (p. 145)

Reynolds went on to describe how the teacher’s view of the student was tainted by her inability to connect with the oral tradition of explicit direction, to which her son was accustomed. If she had not witnessed the interaction herself and did not have the wherewithal to guard against internalizing her son’s behavior as something she was doing wrong as a mother, Reynolds suspected that her child’s experience throughout the school year likely would have transpired in an undesirable manner.

Noguera (2001) recounted an experience with an administrator in an urban school who was dealing with a situation where a student claimed that she had hit another student in an effort to defend herself. After informing the assistant principal that the student would be suspended for 3 days, despite the reasons why she engaged in the altercation, the principal went on to share with Noguera, her view of the student and her parent, “‘Sure I think that self-defense is legitimate at times, but I know when I’m dealing with problem people, and this girl and her momma have serious problems’” (p.191).

Tapping into Parental Power

So how can educators tap into parents’ knowledge about their children? Many of the current models are not necessarily broken; they may simply need a more deeply entrenched, culturally responsive stance. As individualized education plans (IEPs) for special education students require special educators to conference with parents on a yearly basis, educators would be wise to not just interview parents yearly, but invite them to be a part of devising tiered supports through the RtI and PBIS processes. Simple shifts in language, which parents can

suggest or even model, as Reynolds (2010) was able to do for her son’s teacher, can go a long way in fighting the throes of disproportionality. Although there are often obstacles to this level of parental engagement (e.g., parent schedules, logistics, language barriers, etc.), it is imperative that parent voice is incorporated. Not just because the law mandates it, but because parents are, perhaps, the greatest resource we have when it comes to educating children.

Whether parents are able to enact the kind of agency Reynolds (2010) displayed, or whether they take a more deferential stance toward educators (More et al., 2013), space must be made for all families to engage. Taking the typical construct of the PTA a step further, this might involve parent-driven committees where parents partner with each other and, therefore, build off each other’s social capital and knowledge regarding the best ways to navigate the school system. These committees could serve in a consulting capacity for administration and teachers around developing discipline policies, academic interventions, and policies that drive school culture. To facilitate this kind of openness toward parents, teachers then, should be prepared for the classroom with an explicit focus on cultural responsiveness both in the classroom and when dealing with families.

The Role of Teacher Preparation

Katsarou, Picower, and Stoval (2010) have taken the stance that because teaching is “a deeply political endeavor that requires expert knowledge of issues beyond the classroom, teacher education programs must embrace a particular responsibility” (p. 137). This responsibility involves connecting preservice teachers with the daily instances of oppression minoritized students and families face as they navigate through inequities like disproportionality. A social justice orientation, by their estimation, is an effort to ensure that “the concern is centered in the informed decision making of teachers, students, parents, and community members through the raising of

social, political, racial and economic consciousness” (p. 139).

This means that, in addition to a culturally responsive component to all coursework, preservice teachers should also be guided through applying this lens to their relationships with parents and families. Administrators, mentor teachers, and other members of the school staff would also need to partner with universities to continue that work at the school level. The goal is to eliminate the racial and socioeconomic bias that prohibits educators from truly engaging parents. A culturally responsive lens alongside a self-check of one’s own biases make possible the malleable approach that is necessary when engaging with parents, particularly when it comes to the work of dismantling disproportionality.

To these ends, it is also important to factor in the logistical challenges that educators sometimes face. Even the most well-intentioned teacher, truly looking to partner with parents, may face many seemingly insurmountable obstacles in this work. For some, it may be difficult to get parents into the school building, making it feel like an uphill battle in eliciting the type of engagement suggested by Reynolds & Howard (2013). Khalifa (2012) added that parents are often the barriers to the engagement process, as “some actively resist and intentionally stay away from schools, while in other cases, parental distance may be a result of the myriad of social problems that often characterize urban and lower income areas” (p. 459). To this point, Harry (1997) made a poignant metaphor for how educators can approach doing this work. She stated,

If I feel like I’m bending over backwards in working with families, then I’m probably doing something wrong! Not only am I doing something unnatural, but, by bending backwards, I’m actually looking away from the person I’m trying to help. (p. 62)

In contrast to this idea of “bending over backwards,” she suggested that educators, instead, lean forward: “Even though our bodies are built for leaning forward, a lot depends on how flexible we are in the first place, and how much practice we get, since flexibility is something

that can be developed” (p. 62). In this light, educators are urged to lean forward into this work with parents and seek ways of understanding that avoid making judgments based on inherent bias.

This work can be done by engaging preservice teachers in a reflective practice that urges them to shift from a place of judgment, to actively finding points of commonality between educators’ and parents’ values around caring for children (Kalyanpur & Harry, 2012). Preservice teachers should, therefore, be afforded as many opportunities as possible to interact with parents (Sauer & Kasa, 2012). This should happen alongside mentor teachers who are prepped to support preservice teachers with a culturally responsive lens. During parent orientations, open school nights, and other school-determined events, educators and preservice teachers should take time to get to know parents and place them as the true experts of their children that they are. Parents should also be invited into the academy; in this way, a bridge can be built between the community and university classrooms. Here, parents can share best practices with preservice teachers around what works best in supporting students and fostering true partnership.

Valuing parents in this way can serve as the conduit for parents to self-determine when they interact with schools and structure those interactions as they wish (Reynolds & Howard, 2013). This is particularly the case when it comes to preventive measures like RtI and PBIS. Understanding students through the parental and home lens can not only inform the RtI and PBIS processes, but also help to eliminate the biases that lead to disproportionality. In turn, this further helps these types of interventions to be more effective and supportive for students while helping educators build capacity around approaching their work with more socio-cultural awareness.

Conclusion

As Harry (1997) stated, “You need to go back to your own starting point, then lean toward the parent in order to grasp the basis of theirs” (p. 72).

Educators then need to ask, “What is my starting point?” Examining one’s own culture is a productive start, but then it is also a matter of examining how one’s culture interacts with that of the communities in which one teaches. For a fruitful examination to take place, educators must also take the time to learn from families, learn about the communities from which they come, and capitalize on their knowledge of their children.

Through this examination, exchange, and knowledge building (Kalyanpur & Harry, 2012), the social capital parents need to navigate schools successfully can be built. Educators can learn more about the students they teach and, therefore, help ward off the effects of implicit biases that often lead to minoritized students experiencing negative consequences for academic and behavioral challenges they might face. None of this can be done without full acknowledgement of the roles that race, culture, and class play in perpetuating the inequities in the modern school system—inequities that place an inordinate amount of minoritized children in special education and subject them to acts of discipline in an unjust manner.

Trust is a key factor in building the types of relationships that will foster true parent engagement. Overcoming a historical distrust of schools and administration by parents should be addressed and understood because of discriminatory practices. This level of trust can come about through reflectiveness and transparency about one’s own unconscious biases (Delpit, 1995). Schools and teacher preparation programs must be willing to do the dirty work of examining biases and cultural incongruence to fight the ills of disproportionality in urban school spaces. In addition, school personnel and administration must be willing to engage and value the communities in which the parents and family members reside, while establishing a rapport with all stakeholders, to foster parental engagement. By rolling up their sleeves and leaning forward (Harry, 1997), perhaps educators can fulfill their quest for the equity and excellence that children deserve as they are educated and supported toward a future of success.

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Additional Resources

1. **Goss, A. C. (2015). Toward a village consciousness: Organizing in the African American cultural tradition. *Journal of Black Studies*, 46, 797–816.**

This article provides a powerful example of true parental and community engagement around the issue of school discipline and the school-to-prison pipeline. Community organizing and acknowledgment and incorporation of culture/heritage were central to the success of the Parent Empowerment Program, the organization of focus in this work. Additionally, PBIS was highlighted as a salient tool in helping to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline in a collaborative manner.

2. **Patterson, K. B., Webb, K. W., & Krudwig, K. M. (2009). Family as faculty parents: Influence on teachers' beliefs about family partnerships. *Preventing School Failure*, 54, 41–50.**

Family as Faculty is a model, reported on in this article, which places special education teacher candidates in simulated IEP meetings with parents of students with disabilities. The goal is to aid preservice

teachers' in seeing the significant value in parent partnerships. Although a cultural component is not explicitly prominent in this model, it nonetheless serves as a great example of how positive views of parental partnership can be fostered at the preservice teacher level.

3. **Quintero, E. (2014). What is implicit bias, and how might it affect teachers and students? (Parts I and II). Retrieved from: <http://www.shankerinstitute.org/blog/what-implicit-bias-and-how-might-it-affect-teachers-and-students-part-i> & <http://www.shankerinstitute.org/blog/what-implicit-bias-and-how-might-it-affect-teachers-and-students-part-ii-solutions>**

As implicit bias toward parents often begins with teachers' experiences with students, this article explains, in part one, exactly what implicit bias is and how it manifests in the classroom. The author highlights teachers' unique position, as compared to those in other professions, to get to know students as a way of eliminating implicit bias. Consequently, part two provides strategies for teachers who wish to engage in this work.